

Investigating the Importance of EFL High School  
Teachers' Intercultural Awareness



Founes Oussama<sup>1</sup>, Hemaïdia Mohamed<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Tiaret, (Algeria), [oussama.founes@univ-tiaret.dz](mailto:oussama.founes@univ-tiaret.dz)

<sup>2</sup> University of Tiaret (Algeria), [mohamed.hemaidia@univ-tiaret.dz](mailto:mohamed.hemaidia@univ-tiaret.dz)

**Abstract:**

The core values of ELT are to enable students to understand language in use, this puts the focus on the crucial role of interculturality and how it may hinder the effective teaching process due to its complexity. While teachers' linguistic competence has been under great concern, it seems that Algerian schools often overlook the significance of interculturality. To find answers for this problem, this study opts for a questionnaire administered to 20 secondary school teachers to examine their perceptions and understanding of interculturality. The findings reveal how teachers dismiss the intercultural dimension both in class and in their daily life. Thus, the incorporation of alternative methods that aim at the intercultural training of teachers is necessary for having culturally sensitive students who can make use of their knowledge to solve real-life problems in context.

**Keywords:** Intercultural Competence; Education; Teachers' Perceptions; Awareness;

**1. INTRODUCTION**

This paper is a result of the recurrent inclination of investigating teachers' intercultural competence and how it affects the students' language abilities. Learning English without an immersion in the cultural context has led to generating void and sense less vocabulary that does not serve for writing, speaking, reading and listening with an already acquired linguistic competence enchainned with an intercultural dimension. Ergo, teachers' intercultural competencies seem to be a crucial criterion in the teaching and learning process. The inextricable relationship between language and culture has been stressed for decades by Many linguists.

**Corresponding author:** Founes Oussama, e-mail: [oussama.founes@univ-tiaret.dz](mailto:oussama.founes@univ-tiaret.dz)

(Byram, 1989) stressed that language is a means for expressing one self understanding of himself and the environment he lives in. Interlocutors sharing cultural competencies have higher chances not only to understand each other but also to cooperate than those lacking as hared repertoire of the same social group uttering words that express common experiences. That is, they refer to facts, events, and ideas that are shared and known among the same social group.

**2. Significance of the study**

The major objective of this study is to ring a bell for teachers, teacher trainers, students and specialists to the substantial need of teaching or learning a language not as confined to its form but to its settings, i.e. language in use as (Ghadessy, 1999, para. 1) defines; “The context is some sort of environment; it’s what’s going on around, where language is some how involved”.

Therefore, uncovering teachers’ intercultural insensitivity and suggesting methodologies to put them in the cultural competence circle that boosts their apprehension of lectures delivered and conversations handled as well become of much importance.

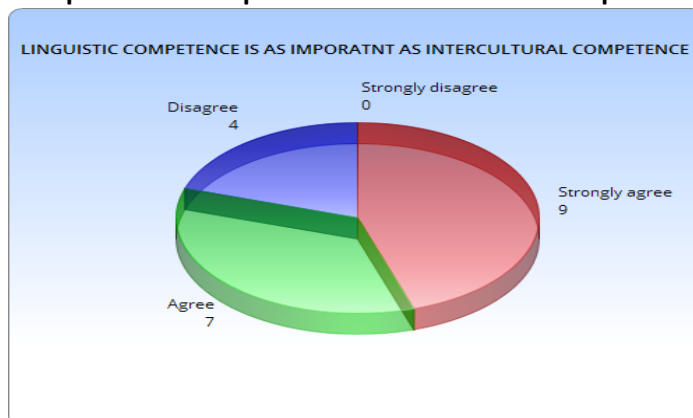
**3. Method**

To acquire reliable and authentic results, a mixed-method questionnaire is administered to teachers to investigate their IC competence and to examine if the term culture has its share during the teaching of four skills. 20 teachers of English from 5 different high schools in Tiaret were given a questionnaire that questions their understanding of the relationship of language, culture and context. Respondents are also asked about the methods and approaches they endorse to improve their students’ cultural knowledge and if they have any preconceived notions about Intercultural Education. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were considered for the analysis.

**4. QUESTIONNAIRE’S ANALYSIS**

a. Do you think that linguistic competence is as important as intercultural competence when teaching?

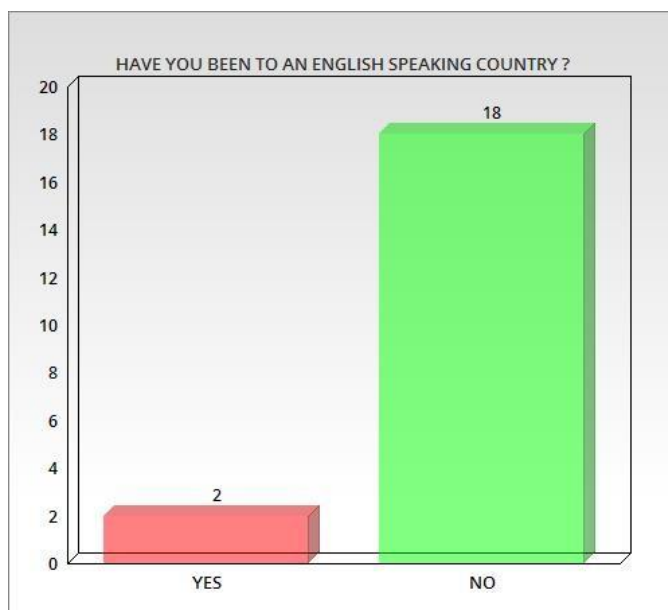
**Graph n°1: The Importance of Intercultural competence.**



The majority of respondents, 80% agree that linguistic competence is as important as the intercultural one, emphasizing their interdependence and how they represent the two sides of the same coin. On the other hand, 20% stand against the idea, justifying their standpoints with the need to transmit the linguistic competence which is enough without students' immersion in the context that will necessarily lead to the teaching of the English speaking countries' cultures. Those teachers maintained that the western culture contradicts the specificities of the Algerian culture being conservative and governed by Islamic rules. Being aware of the deep culture of a certain community does not necessarily mean that its values should be blindly embraced. According to Hinkel (2001), The invisible culture covers much more than norms or values but conflicting ideologies within one community, that is, a cultural norm might be accepted by some and rejected by others in one context. Thus, being aware of what Hinkel calls deep culture entails teachers' awareness, not adoption.

b. Have you ever been to an English speaking country?

**Graph n°2: travel history to English speaking countries**

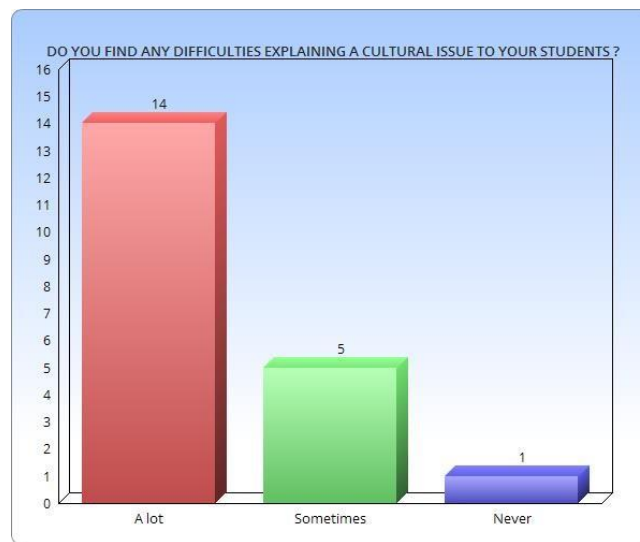


The graph demonstrates how of the among teachers questioned, only 10% of them had the opportunity to visit an English speaking country while 90% of them have never been there. In fact, this justifies the intercultural ignorance of both teachers and their students. Visiting an English speaking country will not only develop the teacher's vocabulary and linguistic skills but will construct a thorough understanding of the culture of the English speaking country including traditions,

customs, lifestyle and obtain enough insights and skills to resolve cultural issues without being culturally shocked. The aftermath of the teachers' visit to an English speaking country has also positive impacts on their pupils because they will be able to consider the cultural dimension while planning for their lessons. According to Byram (1997), intercultural communicative competence does not only include being aware of others' cultures but also accepting differences and the way a particular community sees life.

- c. Is it challenging to explain a cultural issue to your students?

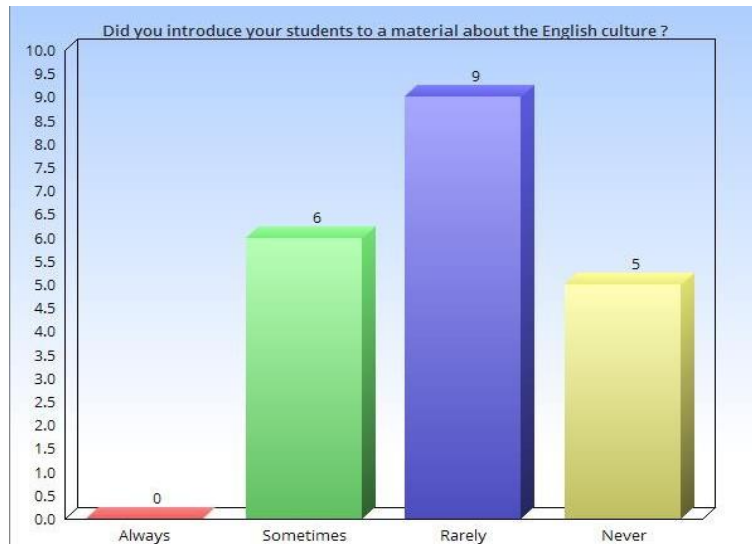
**Graph n°3: Intercultural understanding difficulties**



Surprisingly, almost 75% of teachers questioned said that they faced difficulties explaining a cultural issue to their students. For example, most teachers reveal their ignorance of the names of typical British monuments, national days, events...etc. The deduction that can be made here is that teaching a language can never be isolated from its culture because texts exposed to the learner are loaded with cultural materials, these cannot be deciphered unless having a background and a shared knowledge with the source text's author. Shaules (2007), stresses further that knowledge about a country's monuments, holidays and historical days is not enough to enhance the intercultural communicative competence because the latter requires a thorough understanding of the abstract elements and relationships a culture builds diachronically.

- D. Do you introduce your students to materials about the English culture?

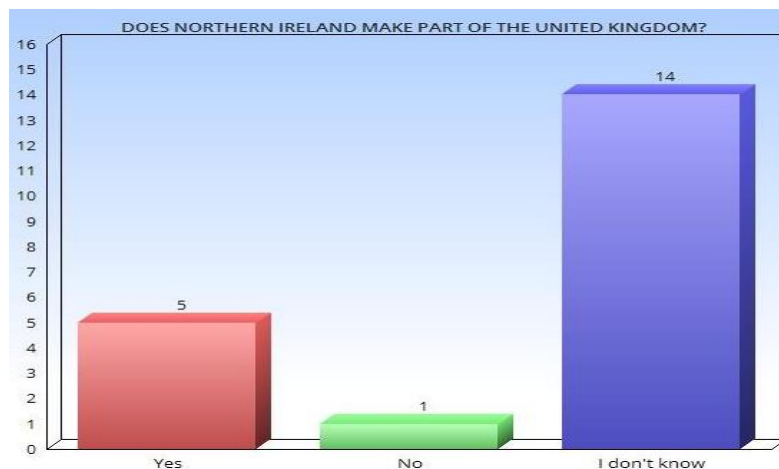
**Graph n°4: Involving students culturally while teaching English**



In this rubric, more than 75% of teachers questioned state that they either "rarely" or "sometimes" introduce their students to adequate materials about the English culture. Moreover, 25% of the teachers said that they have never done it, these answers may seem astonishing for some but as a teacher, one may say that such disconnection is anticipated due to various reasons. Teachers are always in a hurry working hard to finish the programme which deprives them of concentrating on the cultural aspect of language. In addition, teaching tools such as projectors are very few in schools and are mostly used by teachers of scientific subjects.

E- Does Northern Ireland make part of the United Kingdom?

**Graph n°5: Awareness about the United Kingdom countries**



Almost 75% of the teachers state that they have no idea if Northern Ireland makes part of the United Kingdom. While 1 teacher gives an incorrect answer, 5 teachers answer correctly. Even though they are teachers of English, the great majority had no cultural knowledge about English speaking countries. This should be taken into consideration by specialists to start working on a new agenda of teacher training programmes, revisiting curriculums and giving enough space for teachers to teach English along with its culture because the ultimate objective is having communicatively competent students and not those memorizing dry and isolated grammar rules.

#### **5. INTERCULTURAL TRAINING FOR EFL TEACHERS**

Middle and Secondary school teachers of English in Algeria need to be trained on the cultural dimension while teaching. Besides, teachers are not thoroughly ignorant of the necessity to consider the contextual environment of teaching the language; however, various obstacles prevent them from concentrating on the cultural elements of English. For example, the syllabus of English in middle schools mainly aims at building a very basic linguistic competence represented in the four skills reading, speaking, writing and listening. Teachers complain about the paucity of culturally loaded teaching units. Per contra, textbooks are full of examples from our national culture, which means the Algerian lifestyle, events, customs...etc. are profusely and generically represented. Ergo, it may be pointed out that practitioners in the field of education such as inspectors, curriculum designers along decision-makers are asked to revisit English textbooks in middle and Secondary schools to serve for the actual inclusion of an intercultural understanding with a cultural pedagogical training for teachers. This has to be exposed to native specialist trainers whom may involve them in an English contextual environment that will reinforce Algerian teachers' performance and their students' IC competencies. Moreover, specialists need to be selective and reserve the right to object when an English cultural element may negatively affect our students.

Teachers should also be trained to deal with cultural issues in their classes. Being in a network of English teachers in Algeria allows one to observe and gain adequate insights into the situation Algerian teachers of English who have never been given the chance to physically travel to an English speaking country like the United Kingdom, USA, Australia, Canada...etc. Attending a seminar, workshop or at least a tourist visit to those countries has a tremendous impact on teachers' perceptions of culture. (Rita Mae, 2018), asserts; "Language is the road map of a culture. It tells you where its people come from and where they are going." In a similar vein, (Flora Lewis, n.d.) goes on to confirm that "Learning another language is not only learning different words for the same things but learning another way to think about things." Thus, it is of much importance to foster IC competence just as much as the linguistic one, simply because the recommended teaching approach in Algerian schools is the Competency-based approach (CBA) which emphasizes

boosting students' competencies to prepare them for real-life situations and to solve problems in context. This implies that the Grammar translation method is no more needed for nowadays generation. Moreover, students nowadays entertain the idea of learning about the culture of the other more than being generically spoon-fed with raw grammar rules like reported speech or passive voice, etc.

#### 6. CONCLUSION

The study sheds light on teachers' rare focus on cultural and contextual competencies as he is not being involved in the environment of the language taught. Most teachers complain about their inability to experience others' lifestyles and customs which results in major divergence between their linguistic and cultural acquaintances. Thus, one may emphasize the obligation of being culturally sensitive for a productive teaching experience. EFL teachers should have been trained either by the inclusion of an interculturality module delivered by competent inspectors or by hiring native specialist trainers whomay feasibly enrich and develop EFL teachers' backgrounds.

Secondary school teachers questioned demonstrate their anxiety about finishing the yearly course which consequently deprives them of considering the cultural aspect. Teaching grammar rules and vocabulary make pupils passionate about memorizing the rules to get good marks rather than being motivated to enjoy learning about different communities which may keep them away from cultural shock and help them use their knowledge to solve real-life problems.

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